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DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO DRL/IRF JHANFORD, NEA/FO
JFELTMAN, NEA/ARP ASTEINFELD, WHITEHOUSE FOR OVP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/09/2018
TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI ASSISTANT MINISTER OF INTERIOR: INDIAN
CHRISTIANS WILL NOT BE DEPORTED

REF: A. RIYADH 1211
[B](#). RIYADH 713
[C](#). JEDDAH 186
[D](#). RIYADH 1162
[E](#). RIYADH 1170
[F](#). RIYADH 1090

Classified By: Charge' d'Affaires Michael Gfoeller
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(S) SUMMARY: Assistant Interior Minister for Security Affairs Prince Muhammad bin Naif (MBN) contacted the Charge' d'Affaires late on the night of August 9 to inform him that no deportation order has been issued for the 14 Indian Christians in Taif, contrary to recent press reports and information from other sources. "Only the Ministry of Interior can issue such an order and we have not done so," he declared. MBN made it clear that no plans exist to deport the 14 Taif Christians. He suggested that "bad people" wishing to harm the US-Saudi relationship may have been behind the rumors of the impending deportation of the Christians. The Prince added that nothing is more important to him than preserving the excellent working relationship that now exists between his ministry and the USG. END SUMMARY.

[2](#). (S) Late on the night of August 9, Assistant Interior Minister for Security Affairs Prince Muhammad bin Naif called the Charge' to discuss the case of the 14 Taif Christians whose rumored impending deportation has been reported in the press and by other sources (Reftel A). Prince Muhammad told the Charge' that the SAG would not deport the 14 Indian Christians in Taif. "Only the Ministry of Interior can issue such an order, and we have not done so," he said. He confirmed that these are the same Indian Christians who were previously arrested in April and were then released (Reftels B, C, D). He stressed the value of immediate bilateral consultations "when these sorts of issues arise." He added that "bad people are trying to disrupt use this issue to our relationship." "Nothing is more important than to preserve and strengthen our relationship," he told the Charge', adding, "and we must not let anyone interfere with this."

[3](#). (S) MBN also asked Charge' rhetorically, "Why has the Indian Embassy not contacted us about this case?" He then noted that he understands the USG's interest in cases having to do with religious freedom issues. In fact, post had previously contacted the Indian Embassy in Riyadh concerning this case, but their response was non-committal.

[4](#). (S) COMMENT: The Prince's comments indicate that the case of the Indian Christians may have been revived by Saudi religious conservatives upset by King Abdullah's policies in support of greater religious tolerance, perhaps specifically

the recent Madrid Interfaith Conference. In that sense the Taif case could be seen as a provocation, timed to coincide with the King's absence on vacation in Morocco. The aftermath of the Madrid Conference, in which Al-Qaeda put out a death threat on King Abdullah for this initiative, shows both the trajectory of reform, but also the personal risk King Abdullah is taking (Reftels E, F). It seems that when the senior SAG leadership became aware of the Taif case, they reasserted their authority over the situation. Further such provocations may well occur in the future, as certain disgruntled elements of the conservative religious establishment in Saudi Arabia try to block or slow the King's reforms.

15. (S) It is also important that MBN acknowledged that the USG has a legitimate interest in religious freedom as an issue, even when it does not involve American citizens. We note that the Indian Embassy has a history of hesitation in defending the rights of its nationals, largely out of fear of affecting the flow of remittances from Indian expatriates. What is perhaps most telling was the Prince's insistence, repeated several times, on maintaining and protecting the bilateral relationship from provocations by those who wish it ill. END COMMENT
GFOELLER